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Roy Francis oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, June 17, 2003

Roy G. Francis (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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Francis, Roy G. (Interviewee) and Greenberg, Yael V. (Interviewer), "Roy Francis oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, June 17, 2003" (2003). *Digital Collection - USF Historical Archives Oral Histories*. Paper 97.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/usfhistinfo_oh/97

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USF Florida Studies Center
Oral History Program
USF 50th History Anniversary Project

Narrator: Dr. Roy Francis (F)
Current Position: Professor Emeritus
of Sociology
Date of Interview: June 17, 2003
Audit Editor: Mary E. Yeary
Final Editor: Jared G. Toney

Interviewer: Yael V. Greenberg (G)
Location of Interview: Tampa Campus
Library
Transcriber: University of Florida
Date Audit Edit Complete: Nov. 3, 2003

TRANSCRIPTION

G: Today is Tuesday, June 17, 2003. My name is Yael Greenberg, oral history program assistant for the Florida Studies Center. We continue a series of interviews here in our studio with former faculty, students, and alumni, in order to commemorate fifty years of university history. Today we will be interviewing Dr. Roy Francis, who came to USF in 1974 as a professor of sociology and German, and he was also hired as the chair of the sociology department.

F: [I was] not professor of sociology and German, just professor of sociology.

G: Good morning Dr. Francis.

F: Good morning.

G: Let's begin by you taking us to the year you arrived in Tampa and what circumstances brought you to the University of South Florida.

F: I came here in 1974 from the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. I had been at the University of Minnesota. My real start was at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, but I was a professor of sociology and statistics at Minnesota for several years. Then I moved to Milwaukee, where I was dean of the College of Letters and Science. When I

got tired of deaning, or higher administration got tired of a guy always fighting for his campus, I was named Brittingham Professor of Sociology and I went back into [teaching]. I hate to say teaching because I make a distinction between being a teacher and a professor. A teacher trains people, but a professor tries to get the individual to learn how to ask answerable questions, whereas a teacher gives you other people's answers to other people's questions. I was more concerned about getting the student to find him or herself. I'll attempt to use the male pronoun because the dictionary's used to saying man, just human being. I had a grade school teacher that told us, you know a one-room country grade school, that boys are unfortunate because man meant both. Women were special because they had the word woman, and that was unambiguous, whereas man was ambiguous [and] it could be either. So I grew up with that, but I also grew up with a feeling that women were just being unfairly treated. My parents were Swedish immigrants, although they met in the United States. Dad was a blacksmith, although at that time we were growing up I was on a farm, and my mother was called a seamstress and males would be called tailors. So as a seamstress she was always subservient. She couldn't be boss and that really rankled me because she could walk down a street and see a woman's gown in a dress and make it for any individual woman. She was really good at that but, she was woman, and so she was always in the second place. I got that irritation with me all the time and my parents taught us we couldn't be prejudice, this was wrong. We didn't have any Negroes, as they were called then, but there were American Indians, and we had to treat them with the same respect as whites. This is fairly important because throughout my life, several important times, I was called a "nigger

lover.” You don’t get that title by accident, [but] it’s because you’re standing up. Some whites stood up and faced the racists, the Ku Klux Klan, and they were called nigger lovers. So it was a title you wore with a certain amount of honor. I mention that because that is part of me. Part of me also was this commitment to humor because I learned as a smarter [person], at least book smarter than the average [person], not genetically smarter, that if you were bookish as a boy you were called a sissy or identified as a girl. So in order to be superior, I learned that if you could joke then they’d be on your side. So I carried that with me when I was in the Army or wherever I was. Humor has always been an instrument of my thinking. Now when I became Brittingham Professor I went back to this academic world. I had been involved in television because a former student of mine in Minnesota [had a] father [who] owned a radio/TV station. I got involved in TV in the 1950s, [so] I’ve been in it for fifty years. When I was at Milwaukee I created a course called Commentary Film Making. I got an NSF grant to get the equipment. The idea was to develop and be able to get students, and later faculty, to write what I call commentary films. They were to write essays. It wasn’t going to be a documentary and just repeat what the facts were, but you’d be able to develop an argument. So in one sense I was one of the early pioneers in TV on the campus. When I was at Milwaukee, I learned that I had Angina, a heart condition, and I was told it would be helpful if I’d go outside and exercise. Oregon is a really cold state, where I grew up, [and] I didn’t like the winter coldness, so we decided that we would move to a warmer climate. I examined California, examined campuses in Arizona, and all these other things. Then here was USF. It was a new campus, it was starting off, and this was exciting. They offered me

the chair and they promised me distinguished professorship, which never materialized, but I soon learned that here, as elsewhere, there was a fight between administration and campuses that wasn't too big of a surprise. I came here and it was a totally different place. If you go here now you can hardly recognize it, the land is full, but then it was more park-like. It was open and there were a few buildings, but you knew there was promise. You knew there was a struggle going on, but in my mind this could be an urban university. We could be different. We didn't have to be held back by the past. We could be oriented to change. I was a demographer and into sociology and studying in social change, so it could be oriented to that. But also there was this thing of feminine equality that was always in my being, and racial equality, that we could be different and women should have a chance. There were some women faculty on the campus, but they were more put down in the structure and out of the way. At that time, the university world was changing. It had grown up and I had matured in the "publish or perish." That was a good slogan. When you published it was supposed to be a creative development of your discipline. It wasn't just hack out stuff, but it was supposed to be a development route. Research and learn. I got a grant to develop commentary filming for equipment and that stuff, and other people were getting grants. Then slowly publish or perish turned into grant or grovel, and if you didn't get a grant you were put out of the way. This wasn't in the 1970s, it became in the 1980s. Now of course if you aren't a grants man, and I say man purposely there, if you aren't out getting grants you're disregarded. In fact the universities tend to serve themselves out to anyone who gets a grant. And if you get a big enough grant, you can buy almost anything on any campus. That's now, but that wasn't

what it was when we came. When we came here I had hoped it would be truly urban and that our athletic program would not be this semi-professional football and baseball stuff that we have anyway, but that we can have it reflect a new student body. [There would be] blacks and whites and women, but [they were] all students. They would be students first. They wouldn't be pupils. They would be active here on the campus. I got involved with these like that. I got involved in the way courses were organized. I got active in the campus, as I did on others in Minnesota or in Milwaukee. I was in campus politics and I got on the faculty senate, got into all sorts of different committees. I would have been very active as a student spokesman trying to get things changed to get courses organized differently than they were, not always in these three hour [blocks]. We even got started in the pass/fail and different kinds of courses so that we could be adaptive and changing, but at the same time guarded. We didn't want to just turn loose. You see, if you don't have quality driven by people who are, I was going to say missionaries, people who really believe in what they're doing, you can fall back and you're easy and then you do it the easy sloppy way. This is always the danger. At the same time, remember there was a big split between the male and female world, and most of the faculty were men, but there were active women, the faculty wives. My wife worked actively, and others, I don't want to mention names because it's not a naming contest, but they got involved. They formed a faculty women's club and it became very active in the campus. What was happening was they got supportive of the library [and] they got supportive of all sorts of programs. There was a madrigal dinner program and the Guarneri Quartet came, and the women's club was a big sponsor to that. They got pushed into that and they got very involved in

making sure that the library was going represent what a university could be like. I think that when we do the history of USF, that group should really be examined very carefully because I think they made a major contribution as to what the campus could really be like. One of the things that I had hoped for, as I said, was that there would be a change in the athletic program, that it wouldn't be the traditional kind. I use the example of the Olympics, where almost any kind of athletic activity would be justified, male or female. But someone's got to pay for the place. This means there's got to be outside support and this means there's always going to be a political element. There's going to be that part of the state. We got put down as we were the intellectuals, we were the liberals, we were the ones who were fighting against the government. It was just a squabble about who gets to control these and who gets to make decisions. That's not unique to Wisconsin. Although we felt here, and I think correctly, that any new campus finds, I'm sure some of the branch campuses of USF feels it in regards to USF that we dominate. We want it our way. A lot of the changes that we were trying to get here, the University of Florida and Florida State stopped [it] because either they wanted it or they viewed it as a threat for whatever reason. I think we have to understand it was a turmoil, but at the same time it made life interesting and exciting. One of the things that came up about this time was, if we're going to go in the direction of sports and football and baseball and basketball and the men's stuff, what are the teams going to be called? They're going to be called the Bulls. Now I mentioned that I was in the military and I was overseas, [and] I mentioned that humor has always been a big part of my life and the way I'm thinking. Even in the Army I organized a program. We called it Holiday Hangovers, and this is going to be a

variety show showing all the talent, of course with GI's. Officers could participate if they wanted to, but they didn't want to take orders from our guys. Norman Lear was in that program we put on, and I was the MC and opened up with jokes. So when I got here, I thought, well why don't we have it here? So I organized, from the very first year, the Faculty Follies. Now it's important that people understand when I said faculty, and in the letter to the *Oracle* I made it very clear that although that was the name that was for the literative Faculty Follies, staff people could participate if they had any kind of talent. If they had musical talent or any kind of talent, they could participate. All I did was serve as organizer and the MC. I had a number of [programs]. I was the MC, as I said, and I would open it up with a commentary and I would carry on a lot of my fights through humor through the Follies. This is, I think, one of my motivations for the program. This gave me a legal, acceptable justification for using humor to present my views. In my scholarly work I uncovered a writer, Anthony Ashley Cooper, who's writing criticized Oliver Cromwell, which this is a long time ago, and joked about him. People got angry and published severe editorials condemning him for joking. So then he wrote an essay, *On Raillery and Wit*, which has become almost like a Bible to me, because he pointed out that if you're deity and cannot stand the test of humor, that could be an idol notion, but every joke should be seriously examined because a good joke contains the truth. In my lecturing here and elsewhere, I changed that last part to be a literative also so that if a joke does not contain the truth, it could be an idle notion. It's a good thing to remember, and that was a part of this whole thrust for having the follies, that I could joke about serious things and then flip that into making the point. The thing that triggered my mind

on this was that one of the arguments that were going on was what we're going to call the athletic team, and the argument was for the Bulls. What's the feminine of Bull? It's cow or heifer. Are we going to say, here are the heifers playing basketball or here are the heifers playing softball? Even today they'll say the women's softball team. They will not say the women's bulls because they know that is stupid. As one of my other follies I pointed out how maybe we should have called them the steers. If people don't know what the difference between a bull and steer is, they're in a tough way.

G: I want to ask you about the sociology department in 1974. I know that you came in as the chair of that department. How was it organized? What were some of the courses?

F: It was the standard course and a standard department. We were moving towards hoping to get a graduate program, and we did, but it was first organized around the classroom. It was more teaching rather than research. There was very little research going on. In fact, in most of the departments there were relatively few people who were really publishing scholars. A number of people who were coming in with me, I wasn't the only one, came here because of the promise of an urban university. Here we can be changed, here we can be different, and here we can have some of our ideas fulfilled. When I was on the faculty senate and these other committees and counsels we formed, there was a whole bunch of us who were fighting for these same things. We needed to get in the research orientation, but we wanted to make it clear that it wasn't just a man's job but women should come in and do research too. They shouldn't be excluded and they shouldn't be pushed into the teaching roles and the secretarial roles and that sort of thing. We could get an equal start. We were succeeding slowly, we didn't fail completely, but we were

only moving towards a doctorate. By that time, you see, we had different notions of what was going on, so anthropology and sociology became separate. All sorts of things were splitting off and we were having a different orientation to what a campus should be like. Women's studies, for example, after I left, became almost homed in the sociology department because of sociology being a natural place for all women's studies, particularly one that has been emphasizing the proper place of women. The whole campus was growing. This is the thing we have to understand. This isn't just a thing that was happening in one department or this department, but it was a struggle that was going on in every department and it made this an exciting place to be. It was really a fantastic experience to be here and to be a part of it to watch it grow. I think something happened when the computer world took over. We've almost become robotized. There was a recent article in the paper where some sociologist was complaining because the students weren't able to write well. Well I made that complaint when I was on the faculty here. I disliked, as a statistician and the kind of person I am, what I call the forced answer test. I didn't like the computerized way of analyzing things because to me that was undoing the purpose of being a student. I wanted students to be creative. Things should come from the student. Even in statistics when I taught [it] they had to do two things. They had to rewrite the lecture notes as their own version of a statistics book. Whether it was filmmaking or sociologic humor, I used to say give me a noun and I'll give you a sociology of it. I wanted whatever to end; the sociology would be basically the same. I wanted students to get in themselves and think out, and then I would write on it. My note many times [was] badly written. I also have a pattern on certain grades, and I gave it,

you can either accept the grade I gave you or you can rewrite it and try for a better grade.

But, I left that to the student because if a student was satisfied with getting a C in a course, I'm not going to force them and say you've got to work for an A or a B. If they were satisfied, okay, it's not my _____, but someone else's. I had a lot of students who would then take me up on that and rewrite, but some of them, when I said this is badly written, thought I was talking about penmanship and they would pen it very carefully. Of course penning takes time and if you scribbled sometimes it is hard to read, but at least you can get it done faster. I was trying to point out [that] good writing has a beginning, it has a thrust, it's going somewhere and you can see it going, and then it has a conclusion. Now the commentary film is supposed to be the same, a beginning, a development, and a conclusion. This was the thrust that I was trying to get people to get involved in so that when they were on their own, they could think. They could structure and come to a conclusion. That's what I thought the university experience was supposed to be all about.

G: What were some of your major initiatives as chairperson of the sociology department?

F: I tried to work with individual faculty members. I didn't think that a chairman is supposed to come down and say this is what we're going to do. I wanted it to come from the faculty, so I would work with the individual faculty members. I was trying to get them stimulated, and see the thing is they would, they'd respond. They had their ideas, they wanted to do things and felt held back, and what they needed was someone to encourage them and someone to help them develop their own things. They could be put down for who cares about that, or try it. If you only get three or four students we know it was dumb, but suppose you can get ten or twelve, so we can get fifteen, so we can get

fifty. I didn't have a thing that I wanted to impose on our department; I wanted it to come from them. The source of any control I had was I would be the real key in the recruiting. It was in the recruiting that you were able to develop, and then when you were recruiting you could promise people they'll support you in this and you can see what they were interested in. That was the way we did it. See that would depend on what the candidate had, not what I had or what I was looking for. I was simply looking for bright people who had an idea who wanted to have a chance. So the way the department responded was in the recruiting. I still recommend that. I'd say that's the best way a department can proceed because if the world is changing, then you can change as the world is changing and you aren't going to focus it or hold them back.

G: How did USF differ from some of the other institutions that you had previously worked at? What were some major differences about the University of South Florida?

F: I think it's that we were growing. Philosophically I think your blessing is your curse and your curse is your blessing, they're just flip sides of the same coin. Whatever is the good thing about someplace can also be its bad. The very good thing about a place like Minnesota is power, [but] that can also be restraint. It's a funny tension between both sides. The very things that make things happen at a place like Minnesota could possibly constrain [and] hold back. Here it was the other. Here we also had to learn in a way that you can't quite imagine. We know that the off campus politics is going to have an impact. The more active you as a faculty member are, particularly if you're in an administrative or a committee leadership position where you're going to be dealing with some off-campus people, you'll encounter it more. If you're withdrawn and not involved

in that stuff you may complain about it, but you'd be vague about your complaints [and] you wouldn't know really what's going on. One of the real differences is the different political structure. The politics of Minnesota were relatively very different from the politics of Wisconsin, but the political structures here in Florida, particularly now under Governor Bush, we have an altogether different kind of political structure. I don't know whether I should say I'm glad I'm not chairman now with this administration [or not], because I certainly would oppose a lot of the ways he has gone about trying to dominate [and] trying to push controls on. But see, that's part of the whole scheme of things. If the faculty member is alerted to that and tuned into that, [they] know they're in the little show and they can be anywhere and they aren't really making much difference. I think the real difference is how the external politics of Florida differs from politics of the other states.

G: In those early days, was the larger community supportive of the University of South Florida?

F: Yeah. See, Tampa was also growing. The urban world was changing and the South was changing; the South was changing very dramatically. Now they're writing things in the paper as though it is a recent thing, but that isn't really quite the case. There was a lot of change going on then. There were forces to hold things back, forces to keep things as they were, there always is, [like racism]. But, Tampa itself was changing. Temple Terrace, the little town where I live now, was changing. It became really an adaptation of the campus, so they were welcoming this. Even now I think the city of Tampa has to acknowledge that the major economic force in Tampa is the University of South Florida.

What happens at the University of South Florida controls Tampa. Not in the sense it's mechanical and does this and that, but if there is a big negative thing, say in the medical program, wham, that would happen and that would really kill things in Tampa too.

There's a balance that has to be worked out, and both sides have to do these peculiar things. They have to maintain their own integrity, and yet they have to mesh and work with [each other]. Meshing and working with [each other] means you make compromises. This is always the difficulty. After the compromise is made you keep saying uh oh, this guy was doing it for himself, although sometimes that's true, this is really what makes life amazing. Particularly if your intellectual activity involves looking at people as people, [this is exciting]. I can see an astronomer, that's not his business [and] he doesn't worry about that. And a mathematician is worrying about number theory, what does he care about that? But, if you are people oriented and you're disciplined, this is exciting.

G: Why were students in the 1970s interested in sociology at USF? What attracted them to sociology at the University of South Florida?

F: I think it's the same thing that attracts them almost anywhere. We do tend to recruit people that have a certain value of concerns. I think you have to have a feeling about what's [important]. It could be, and usually is, emotional and stupid and wrong in the factual sense of wrongness. I remember, this was here, but I remember it happened in the 1960s and 1970s that I had a student who got involved in the student activity, you know the anti-war and all that sort of stuff. He was wearing a hooded jacket or something and he had it all the time. He'd been in one of these street-based things. So I commented to

him about that one time and he said, oh, he just had to rebel. He had to throw it away and so they threw away all of his clothes. I said, oh, you just changed one uniform for another. He said, oh my god, that's true. That student came back and said, "Thanks," and went on. That turned him around again, so he was freed from both sides. That was a lucky fit. I don't know what popped in my head to say that you changed one uniform for another, but it's relevant here. To answer your question, we tend to get in sociology, and the social science disciplines in general, people who for whatever reason are concerned about the world they live in. So they bring that with them. Now I don't like to say a liberal conservative because I'm conservative in way that I want to conserve freedom of speech, [and] I'm liberal in racial and gender equality. I used to tell my students I am ahead of center, not to the right or the left. The geometry of that is really what's silly because there are now students who are really radically conservative. But see, they have concerns; they have concerns about society. They're the kind of people, I suppose optimist people, who tend to get involved in the social sciences. That's always been the case, but the question is, what is it that's activating the young people? The women's movement activated a generation and they came in and they mostly came to the social sciences. You don't see many women activists who went into mathematics. What motivates people? They're going to go to where their questions are going to be answered. If they find some area that will enable them to be themselves, then they're going to go there everywhere. That's always been the case. I suppose it was the case in the 1920s and 1930s.

G: In terms of how the department changed, you came in the mid 1970s and by the time you

retired in 1993, I'm certain that there were major changes that happened in the sociology department here at the university. Can you talk a little bit about that?

F: Yeah I can talk a very little about it. Mainly because at that time, theoretically, we were told we were to retire at age sixty-five. I was retired at seventy-three, so I was already breaking the rules. I was still involved with students. Many of my students, particularly graduate students at that time, were women. I had one woman who was physically handicapped and had emotional problems. I don't know how to put this, you tried to help her, but at the same time it was time consuming because of her problems it takes more time. But, then on the other hand, I was involved with another student who was an artist. She worked among the homeless and she drew pictures of the homeless. I directed her master's thesis and that wasn't finished until December 1996, two years after I had retired. But you see, to answer your question, when you get to be about seventy or so, you're starting to get signals. Somewhere I learned, and maybe it was Greg Stone, whose mother was a politician, and I learned it from him, it's better to leave a year early than a year too late. If you stay that extra year or two [and] you goof and you make dumb [mistakes], then you ruin yourself [and] you ruin everything you've done. So there comes a time when you have to be asking yourself, is it time to go? Now when that happens you are pulling out of the fight in the department and there are changes going on. You can see, also having gone through it yourself that the people who are now in power would like to be able to replace you. Now sometimes if they're good and can work it right, and if your salary is commensurate, they can get two for the price of one. I'm going to leave and they get two employees, so there will be evident change there. I'd

been recruiting women and women leaders to come here. Now I'm sure that they didn't understand me and what I've done and the fight I've made for women's rights, and that was not of concern, that wasn't an issue, because they had their job. They had to do just like I had to do, so there was a change going on. It was very clear to me that intellectually active women were finding a home in sociology, and intellectually and morally I couldn't oppose that. That in a way was what I thought was significantly happening, and they needed it. Whatever mistakes they're going to make, or I make mistakes, the next generation will be there to correct them. So there were changes going on, but it wasn't changes that I was in a sense looking at, directing, and saying, okay this is where we're going. I was leaving it to them. You see, if I had connected myself to that, then I couldn't leave. This I think is very important to understand. If you get involved in that stuff, you either will then leave angered, disappointed, frustrated, or something, but it will be negative. That's not the way you say farewell, at least it shouldn't be.

G: Two more questions. In your nearly twenty years of service to the University of South Florida, what are you most proud of here at the university?

F: I think of the students. I got a lot of reaction from the students. Here is a letter [from] when Betty Castor was president that's dated March 8, 1995. I had been retired now for over two years now, and a student wrote her a letter commending me for what I had done [and] how I had helped her. The student advisory magazine gave me a plaque that's outstanding teacher. When you give your career to students and say you're what it's all about, and then they say yeah, thank you, what more could you ask for? I just couldn't

ask for anything better. But, the administration from time to time would recognize that. I was granted emeritus status. I understand that in some places emeritus has become almost automatic, [that] if you get retired they call it emeritus, but it used to be for the distinguished faculty. But, then the whole world changed to people are supposed to feel good about themselves. Grade school kids are flunking out, but they're supposed to feel good about themselves. A professor that should have been fired twenty years ago you hear they've given them emeritus and that sort of stuff. That happens, but there's also some genuine signs that the administration appreciates it.

G: This is my final question to you, and this is something that I've asked all of my interviewees. If you could leave something on tape, either to future faculty and students or to your colleagues and your students that you've had over the years, what would you want to say to them about how the University of South Florida influenced you? What would you want to say about the university and your experiences at the University of South Florida?

F: The first thing I would remind them is that all of this stuff we read about science and scholarship being ethically neutral is wrong. Academic freedom is based on intellectual honesty. You cannot lie about your data [and] you cannot lie about your procedure and tests. The first commitment you have to make, and this has to be virtually a religious commitment [and] deeply felt responsibility; you have to commit yourself to intellectual honesty. If you're not honest, and you don't demand your students to be honest and if you don't demand your administrators to be honest, this is the thing I would say. I was able to use humor as a way in which I could be honest. Sometimes you can't be brutally

honest [because] that's going to undo you, so you have to use what devices are available. But, if you have this understanding of humor and really sincerely believe that, then you can joke about the serious providing you are then as serious about the jokes. I think I experienced it more here than at the other campuses. I think it's generally true, but I really found it true here and I hope they can maintain that, that this is a campus where intellectual honesty and humor can coexist. I'd like to see some faculty pay attention to this [and] pick up the idea of the Follies. [I'd like to see them] come back and have it again, but be sure if they do that it isn't just faculty, it's [got to be] faculty and staff. Anyone who participates in making this thing work should be able to participate and express themselves through song or humor or dance or whatever they do. It's been a great ride. But, I also think that we should understand the role the women's club made on this campus. As the role of women changed on the campus, and you get the male who is now on campus, there must be some way to involve them so that it's like a family affair. That's what it was before. If they lost the feeling that the family is involved, then they've lost an awful lot. If the university can say, well we're not like Wal-Mart or General Motors, we're a university [and] we are people oriented. It's the whole person [we're concerned with] and the whole person includes his family or her family. If they can feel that, believe that, and act that out, then I think this is going to continue to be a great place.

G: Dr. Francis, I want to thank you very much for your interview.

F: Well, I'm glad to be here.

End of Interview